How Michael Gove is dumbing down England's schools

'Dumbing down' may seem a strange accusation. Isn't Gove insistent on 'raising standards', like Conservative education ministers before him? We need to dig beneath the familiar rhetoric and expose what lies beneath the surface - look at the impact of policies and not just their headline appeal.

When Tory politicians talk about 'high standards', they invariably link this to exclusiveness. They cannot imagine other people's children being as well educated as their own. That is why, for all their insistence that class size makes no difference, they pay large amounts of money to make sure their own children are taught in very small groups.

Exam results in England have gone up every year, so the Tories automatically assume that they must be getting easier. They simply cannot accept that children other than their own can be successful learners.

GCSE and the new Ebacc

In 1970, before the GCSE was introduced as a unified exam for all 16 year olds, 47% of children left school with no qualifications at all. Now it is less than 1%. In 1960, when grammar schools were the norm across England, nearly 80% of 11-year-olds were more or less written off. In fact, only 16% of 16 year olds achieved five O-level passes (the equivalent of A*-C grade at GCSE). Now it is nearly 60% including English and Maths. Yet Michael Gove seems determined to turn the clock back.

Less than 20% of pupils achieved the notional Ebacc in its first year, arbitrarily defined as A*-C in English, Maths, double science, history or geography, and a foreign language (though partly this is because many chose other subjects). The Secretary of State for Education's proposal to use an even tougher Ebacc to replace GCSEs will itself prove an enormous setback to many young people. Indeed, even in the Tory 'golden age' of grammar schools, many otherwise successful pupils failed to pass Maths or a Language despite repeated attempts. Yet Gove seems happy to see the majority written off. Is this really 'raising standards'?

In the Spring, the Lib Dems appeared outraged when Gove proposed to run a two-tier system – a new O-level for a minority, the old GCSE for the rest. Now Nick Clegg openly supports a one-tier certificate: Ebacc for a minority and a majority who will leave school with no qualifications at all. Most students will receive nothing more than a note of their grades from their own school.

Through recent decades, education policy has been based on the argument that all students need to be well qualified to fit them for the 'knowledge economy', even though, in reality, many of them would end up in low-skill low-paid jobs. The new policy direction seems premised on rising levels of youth unemployment, already approaching a quarter of under 25s. (It is even worse in Spain, where about half are out of work, and with rising figures across Europe.) We can read Gove's new exam policy as a sign of how few opportunities capitalism now has to offer, and how many kids will end up on the scrap-heap.

The English A*-C grade fiasco

It seems clear that the last-minute change in GCSE English grade boundaries was the direct or indirect consequence of Government interference. Of course their argument was to prevent 'grade inflation' and to 'raise standards'. This is muddle-headed. You do not improve the overall achievement of 16 year olds by redefining some of their grades. You improve their achievement by enabling them to learn more and in more interesting ways – in the case of English, to write in different styles and for different audiences, to engage with challenging and controversial ideas, and so on.

The confusion is between quantity and quality. Let us imagine an English exam based on spelling difficult words, or a Maths test based entirely on long division. It would be an

illusion to think that you were improving the overall standard of young people's English or Maths by raising the pass mark from 60 to 70%. You actually need to think about the curriculum – the opportunity to learn.

There is no evidence to suggest that GCSE English has suffered 'grade inflation', though this did occur with the Key Stage 2 reading tests. It wasn't done by altering marks, but by re-setting the criteria for tests to reduce them largely to literal understanding rather than interpretation and 'reading between the lines'. New Labour politicians and their hangers-on needed evidence to prove their new Literacy Hour was effective. Political interference, on that occasion, led to more children reaching target grades but crucially it led to a dumbing down because it focused teachers on a narrower range of skills.

As a socialist I find it very worrying that an assessment system encourages children to 'spot the right answer' but not to weigh up evidence and distinguish between fact and opinion.

PISA as evidence of 'falling standards'

There is little doubt that England is doing much worse in PISA international tests than previously. In Reading and Mathematics England was around the upper Quartile in 2000 but down to the mid-way position in 2009. It is missing the point, however, simply to talk, as Gove loves to do, of 'falling standards'.

Crucially, the PISA questions look for more holistic and critical reading and for the application of mathematical and scientific knowledge to problematic real-world contexts. Put crudely, they test an ability to *think.*

Despite the intolerable pressures now being placed on teachers and their students in England, with its Orwellian inspection system where satisfactory is unsatisfactory and only outstanding is good enough, it is extremely worrying that young people now seem less able to *think.* (I say 'despite', but maybe it is 'because'.)

This cannot be improved by raising the hurdle of a C-grade pass. It will not be done by inventing a new exam, especially if the Ebacc is determined by a false nostalgia for a grammar school education. It requires a rethinking of the curriculum, and in fact a different type of assessment. Ironically, a greater emphasis on writing against the clock, producing hurried answers from start to finish within 45 minute time-slots, is likely to make matters worse. For my O-level History in the 1960s, I had to regurgitate 14 causes of the First World War in just over half an hour and got top grade, but that certainly didn't help me distinguish or explain which might be the most important or how they were linked. I learned to distinguish eight different types of adverbial clause for my O-level English exam, but this didn't help me to write convincingly.

Ironically, while Gove insists that timed and externally marked exams are more rigorous, the elite private schools are complaining that their students are constrained by this system. The general secretary of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference complains of a tick-box approach for marking, whereby students have to be drilled to use the required 'buzz words': 'our most able pupils who don't use the buzz words don't get the top grades – but they produce the most novel and insightful answers. The markers can't accommodate the originality of their answers.'

The new Primary Curriculum

Failing pupils, failing teachers, failing schools – and all in the name of 'raising standards'. This pattern is also apparent in the proposed Primary Curriculum published in June.

Detailed programmes of study have been published for English, Mathematics and Science, though actually they do not even cover these subjects. In Maths the emphasis is overwhelmingly on procedures for arithmetic calculations; in English, spoken language is marginalised and literacy focused on the sub-skills of phonics recognition, spelling, grammar and punctuation. Long lists of spellings are prescribed for each school year, but inappropriate

to most children of that age in terms of both difficulty and range of experience. For example, the spelling list for Year 3 pupils includes enclosure, nobly, frantically, dramatically, inflation, reign, professor and piteous. Somewhat symbolically, the list also includes chauffeur and champagne! The complexity of grammatical knowledge required of most Year 6 pupils is similar to that expected of a minority of 16-year-olds by the former O-level.

The problem is not just about expecting too much too early. As Piaget established nearly a century ago, primary age children (and many secondary) require physical objects and pictures to support logical thinking. Without them, they might learn set procedures by rote, and get them right through lots of practice, but real understanding is likely to be shaky.

Besides, the English curriculum will be backed up by tests and inspections, and children who don't clear the hurdles will be viewed as failures. It may all be a way of setting up schools to fail, to drive thousands of primary schools towards closure and Academy status.

Already, the absurd phonics test for Year 1 (age 5-6), which requires children to read aloud nonsense words, is labelling 4 out of 10 children as failures. For this Government to equate literacy with reading aloud nonsense words shows how much it understands education.

Back to the future

It makes no sense to speak of 'standards' without thinking about the world in which children are growing up, and the kind of future which we hope will be available for them.

By contrast, Gove's understanding of curriculum is driven by a cloudy nostalgia. As Kenneth Baker (Thatcher's education minister) once remarked, remembering his village school, "I learnt my tables by heart, my poems by heart, it was a wonderful education, copperplate writing, and we had tests!"

We ought to ask ourselves whether accurate recall of the eight times table or the Ancient Mariner or beautiful handwriting will help children find their way and live a more satisfying life in the 21st Century. Or rather, especially when driven by the fear of failure, will it make them more docile and anxious and narrow-minded and subservient?

Teachers need the opportunity to work together, to teach creatively and to build a curriculum based, at least partly, on what young people care about. Young people need the opportunity to think about the big issues – their own lives, their futures, society, the planet. They deserve the excitement of expressing their ideas in print, through the internet, by making videos or performing music or drama – not simply learning by rote and cramming to reproduce the 'right answers' for an exam. A decent assessment system would recognise, rather than undermine, this kind of learning.

Time to take back control

Before 1990, at least until age 14 and the start of exam courses, teachers had control of the curriculum. They were well supported by local authority advisers and advisory teachers and university education departments, as well as national curriculum development projects. Perhaps in retrospect there was too little consistency or a need for greater coherence, but this can be achieved through democratic and collegial processes of consensus-building. Unfortunately parents and the learners themselves had little involvement.

With every curriculum revision, starting with the first version of the National Curriculum, what happens in classrooms has been increasingly controlled from above, through lists of requirements written by panels with little practical understanding of schools. The end result, it seems, of one of the most regulated education systems in Europe, is a dramatic decline in young people's ability to think.

Internationally, experts in school development are coming to recognize the futility of this way of running things. Diane Ravitch's bestseller *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (2010) was subtitled *How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. Ravitch is a veteran American conservative who had supported tests and school privations for

20 years but has now publicly recanted. She argues that high-stakes testing and a threatening control of teachers has led to mediocrity. Furthermore, schools are so obsessed with test results that they are no longer helping young people grow up with a sense of community and citizenship.

World-renowned school improvement experts Michael Fullan and Andy Hargreaves presented very similar messages in their 2012 book *Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*.

In 2011, Pasi Sahlberg, a leading Finnish and international expert, published *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* in which he explained how their top-performing system does so well without inspection, without high-stakes testing, with mixed-ability classes, through high levels of support for children who are struggling. This is not a laissez-faire system, but one in which discrete and appropriate monitoring of less successful schools is followed up by respectful and collaborative advice and support behind the scenes.

The situation in England has become critical, but systems based on tight control and meagre understanding don't change by themselves. They can only be changed when teachers and parents decide that enough is enough. *If not now, when?*